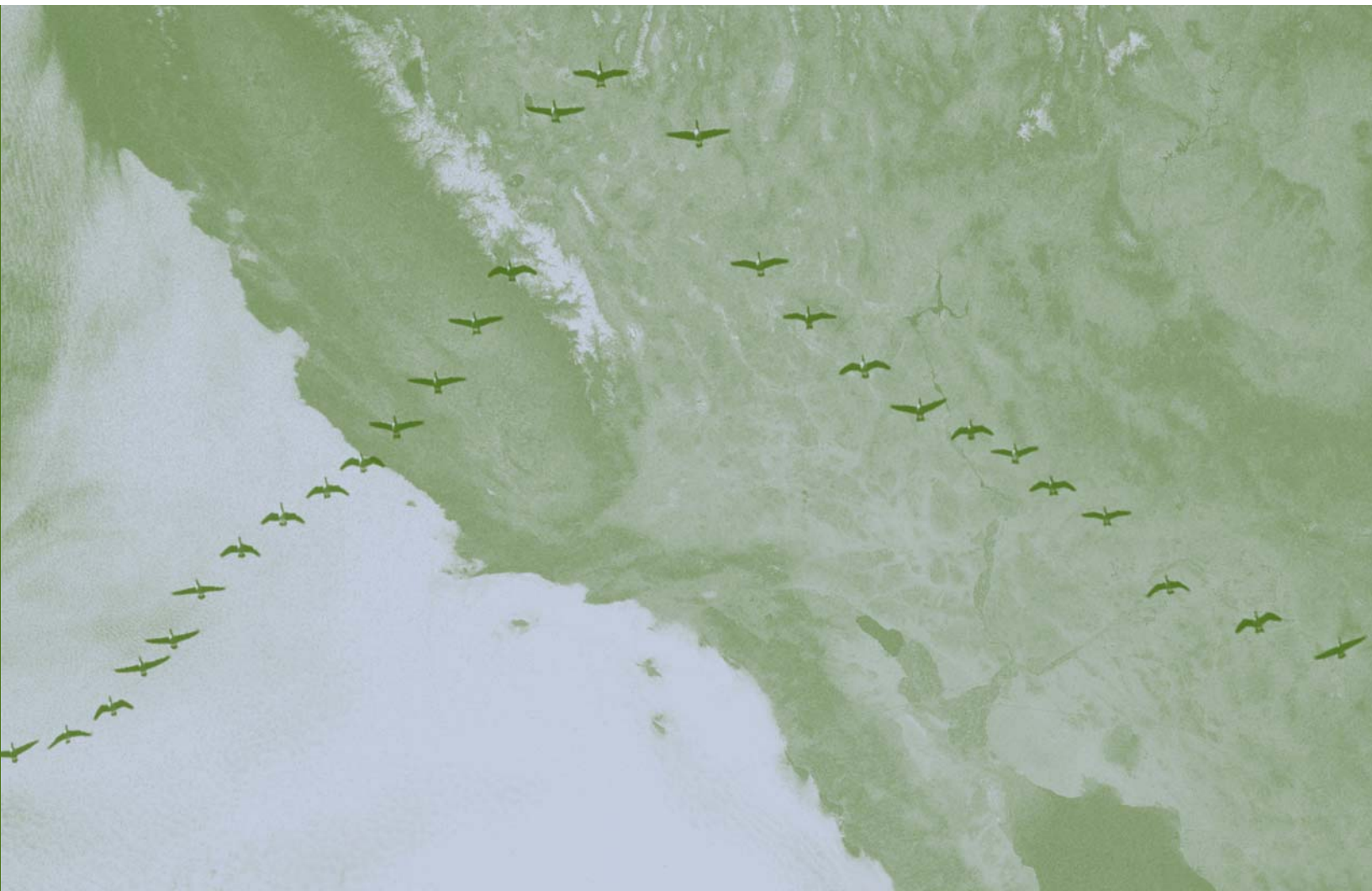


ACTIONS FOR JOINT PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE BETWEEN CALIFORNIA AND BAJA CALIFORNIA

A Strategy Brief of the US-Mexico Border Avian and Pandemic Influenza Initiative



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*Cover photo-illustration:
Satellite imagery of California and Baja California, NASA
Geese flying in formation, istockphoto © 2007*

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AT THE XXIV ANNUAL BORDER GOVERNORS CONFERENCE (BGC) ON AUGUST 25, 2006, in Austin, Texas, Governor Schwarzenegger of California and Governor Elorduy of Baja California signed a Joint Declaration calling for a concerted and coordinated effort between the sister states to prepare for and respond to the health threat posed by highly pathogenic avian influenza, especially the H5N1 subtype (HPAI/H5N1). Pursuant to this declaration, in September 2006, California and Baja California launched the US-Mexico Border Avian and Pandemic Influenza Initiative. This initiative takes a tri-sectoral (health, agriculture, wildlife) approach, mobilizing California state officials representing the former Department of Health Services (currently the Department of Public Health), Department of Food and Agriculture, and Department of Fish and Game along with Baja California counterparts representing the State Committee for Health and Safety (led by the Secretariat of Health and Secretariat of Public Security-C4), Secretariat of Agricultural Development, and Secretariat of Environmental Protection. Officials from the BGC Health Work Table and US-Mexico Border Health Commission have contributed as partners in implementing the initiative.

Guiding Principles

In seeking solutions to the shared and significant concern of HPAI/H5N1, officials agreed on two guiding principles. First, the goals and outcomes of the initiative should align with and build on relevant pre-existing efforts at the international, federal, state, and local levels. These include the forthcoming North American Plan for Avian and Pandemic Influenza developed by the Security and Prosperity Partnership, which will establish the framework for harmonizing surveillance practices and communicating across the border, among other measures. Second, the initiative should aim to combine with longer-term efforts to sustain political will in addressing border health issues and to strengthen institutional capacities for defending against other animal and human health emergencies. These efforts include the Early Warning Infectious Disease Surveillance Programs in all 10 US-Mexico border states, which are building capabilities for preventing and controlling epidemic-prone and emerging infectious diseases through cross-border epidemiologic and laboratory surveillance, workforce education and training, and communication and information technology development.

Strategic Actions and Goals

Based on the common conceptual elements featured in the federal/state plans of the US/California and Mexico/Baja California and priorities identified during planning meetings and tabletop workshops, officials determined actions that constitute the three-pronged strategy outlined in this brief and described in a longer document. Each strategic action has a corresponding goal that provides a theme for this year's activities and establishes an agenda for future directions.

Strategic Action	Goal
1 Promote binational preparedness, communication, and coordination	Ensure that participating agencies establish mutual expectations and can carry out their respective responsibilities before and during a pandemic in the US-Mexico border region
2 Strengthen early warning infectious disease surveillance	Ensure that animal and human health officials can collect, interpret, and exchange data for mutual “situation awareness” and public health action
3 Inform and support rapid response and containment operations	Ensure that spokespersons representing animal and human health agencies/bodies can coordinate and deliver messages to protect public safety, reduce risk, and mitigate adverse impacts

Strategic Action 1:

Promote Binational Preparedness, Communication, and Coordination

Background and Rationale:

After the bioterrorism incidents following 9/11, federal, state, and local authorities added public health to the group of first responders that historically consisted of emergency medical services, fire, and law enforcement. In the context of HPAI/H5N1, the government agencies responsible for animal and human health collectively assume that first responder role of public health. This strategic action aims to foster communication and coordination among these agencies and to prepare them for interaction with other first responder groups before and during a binational pandemic.

Major Activities and Achievements:

Since the initiative’s launch, 14 discussion-based pandemic preparedness and management exercises have been held. These included 12 planning meetings, during which officials discussed their authorities for action, exchanged plans in existence or under development, identified gaps in these plans, and proposed ideas to fill these gaps. Officials also participated in two tabletop workshops with simulated binational pandemic scenarios to practice group problem-solving, brainstorm on new processes, and enhance teamwork and consensus-building skills. These exercises clarified agency responsibilities at each pandemic phase/stage, promoted interagency understanding of institutional cultures, and resulted in the development of emergency contact directories and procedures to avoid confusion and ensure better coordination during an actual crisis.

Future Directions:

Officials foresee the implementation of the initiative as a multi-year commitment. Following recommendations issued by the governors and using earmarked resources provided by the federal governments, the California Department of Public Health and Baja California Secretariat of Health have spearheaded this year’s efforts, developing cross-border mechanisms for sharing information on surveillance and risk communication toward the goal of preventing and controlling a potential binational HPAI/H5N1 outbreak among human populations. Next year, the initiative will continue to convene both health agencies to address other critical issues, such as implementing isolation and quarantine meas-

ures and sharing strategic national stockpile supplies. It will also call upon the agriculture and wildlife agencies to examine the lessons learned from this year and to develop sector-specific strategic actions for the prevention and control of HPAI/H5N1 outbreaks among animal populations in the border region.

Strategic Action 2:

Strengthen Early Warning Infectious Disease Surveillance

Background and Rationale:

Despite their similarities, the epidemiologic surveillance systems for influenza and other respiratory illnesses in California and Baja California lack the capabilities of exchanging information for public health action. This strategic action aims to build these capabilities, in response to specific needs. For example, the revised International Health Regulations specify that all signatory countries (including the US and Mexico) must develop mechanisms for international notification of “human influenza caused by a new subtype,” among other diseases, within 24 hours of detection.

Major Activities and Achievements:

Under the auspices of the initiative and in partnership with federal and local health agencies, state epidemiologists from California and Baja California developed and pilot-tested forms and protocols for cross-border reporting of binational cases of HPAI/H5N1 and other urgent communicable diseases. They also configured the California Health Alert Network (CAHAN), a computer-based communication system, for secure transfers of disease case information and rapid alerts of cases, outbreaks, and other public health emergencies between the sister states. Throughout the year, the initiative supported three binational public health workforce training programs to enhance technical knowledge and skills for surveillance: (a) use of CAHAN for binational case reporting; (b) applications of Epi Info™, a free software program from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, for binational outbreak investigations; and (c) adaptation of telehealth technology for enhanced surveillance in remote border areas and populations.

Future Directions:

Complementing the cross-border binational communicable disease case reporting efforts, state and local epidemiologists from California and Baja California intend to establish a binational influenza case detection mechanism. It will entail uniform conduct of influenza surveillance in both states: using the same criteria to identify cases, collecting the same data to register patients, administering the same diagnostic tests to confirm cases, and sharing results to track regional disease trends. The initiative will continue to support binational public health workforce training. Next year’s agenda will build on previous topics and also include new components, such as professional exchanges among public health laboratorians to share information on testing capabilities and initiate discussions on mutual assistance during a binational influenza pandemic.

Strategic Action 3:

Inform and Support Rapid Response and Containment Operations

Background and Rationale:

Risk communication should occur as a dialogue with the public to facilitate emergency management efforts, build public trust and compliance, and minimize social disruption in a pandemic. The value of a communication plan lies not only in its effectiveness as a document that specifies the ownership and delivery of information in a crisis, but also in the benefits accrued during the process of its development – the promotion of an internal dialogue and the building of trust among government agencies that need to be engaged in a unified response. In March 2007, California’s agriculture, health, and wildlife officials

jointly developed and published the Scenario-based State Agency Review describing the planning considerations and offering messaging “themes” for risk communication before a pandemic. This strategic action aims to expand this effort by facilitating participation of counterparts from Baja California and addressing special risk communication needs during a binational pandemic.

Major Activities and Achievements:

Under the auspices of the initiative and in partnership with local health agencies, state public information officers and technical outbreak response staff from California and Baja California jointly drafted the Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) Plan for the California-Baja California Border Region as an addendum to the risk communication section in the State of California Public Health Emergency Preparedness Plan. The border CERC plan describes current communication practices, identifies the state and local public information officers, and specifies the communication activities before, during, and after a pandemic. In addition, the initiative supported a binational public health workforce training program on rapid community health surveys to collect data on the public’s knowledge and beliefs on risks related to HPAI/H5N1, developing the infrastructure and building capacity for “communications surveillance.”

Future Directions:

Following their training, technical outbreak response staff from state and local health agencies of California and Baja California will jointly design and implement rapid community health surveys in two pairs of sister-cities: (a) San Diego and Tijuana; and (b) El Centro/Calexico and Mexicali. They will analyze the data and present the results in a regional risk communication forum. This event will also convene state and local public information officers, who will review and update the border CERC plan as a “living” document.

Challenges and Opportunities

Despite being launched during a period of major reorganization of the state health agencies in California and Baja California, the initiative has made significant progress in convening officials for planning meetings and tabletop workshops, developing binational case detection and reporting mechanisms for surveillance, and drafting a plan and gauging public opinion for crisis communication. The sustainability of the initiative, especially the extent of sister-state cooperation, will depend on the availability of resources and commitment of political will. At the federal level, officials have agreed to channel financial and technical assistance for binational pandemic influenza preparedness planning in the US-Mexico border states through their Early Warning Infectious Disease Surveillance Programs. Such assistance will firmly establish California’s Office of Binational Border Health and Baja California’s Department of Epidemiology, which oversee these programs, as the institutional bases for implementing the multi-year initiative between the two states. At the state level, Baja California’s recent gubernatorial election will bring new leadership to its health, agriculture, and wildlife agencies. Counterparts from California’s agencies will embrace these changes and forge new coalitions to marshal political will in averting the shared threat of HPAI/H5N1.



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